

The Art Dossier

Q&A with Helen Allen, Co-founder of (e)merge art fair

Posted on September 22, 2011 by [admin](#)

Q&A with Helen Allen, Co-founder of (e)merge art fair

The highly anticipated (e)merge art fair officially opens today to the public with over 80 exhibitors from 15 countries. The Art Dossier sits down with Helen Allen, Co-founder of (e)merge art fair, to discuss her latest project in Washington D.C. and the challenges and rewards of organizing a new fair.

How did you become involved with art fairs?

I have been attending art fairs of one form or another for almost 20 years and always enjoyed the excitement that seemed inherent in the exhibitions I attended. Before organizing fairs I attended fairs on behalf of clients while I was with an art advisory firm, then I assisted European galleries with installations and sales at The Armory Show for a few years. I was approached to launch Ramsay Fairs in the US and was responsible for launching AAF in the US – and a few years later founded PULSE.

Why did you choose Washington DC for (e)merge? Are there plans to expand (e)merge to other locations?

DC's art community has been growing larger and more vibrant over the past decade. Last year, Jamie, Leigh and I began talking about collaborating on a project that helped draw attention to all that the city now has to offer in terms of contemporary culture. Over the next several months, we worked out a plan to introduce innovative exhibitions and educational programming within the familiar setting of a hotel art fair. Many people have begun to ask this question. We are open to the possibility, but at the moment we are focused on building the contemporary art market, culture and clientele in DC – many collectors and curators are excited to have yet another reason to explore the cultural offerings here.



Five things to know about Helen Allen

Favorite city in the world?

I don't have just one – it depends on so many factors. My favorites are: Rome, Barcelona, London, Buenos Aires... and in the US – New York and Washington DC!

Favorite museum?

For the collections: The Metropolitan Museum, MoMA, the Frick Collection, The Uffizi, The Louvre, The National Gallery of Art ... there are others as well. With regards to the architecture – I enjoy the Foundation Beyeler and Norman Foster's Carré d'Art in Nimes which are both architecturally stimulating spaces that clearly and elegantly present exhibitions.

Favorite restaurant?

We actually like to cook at home. But some favorite NY spots are Lavagna, Little Owl and Jean Georges (for a big night out) and in DC – it's Marvin.

Last good book you read?

At this stage I read newspapers, magazines and copious amounts of children's books! Some of my kids favorites at the moment are "Oh the Places you will Go", "Little Pea" and "The Gruffalo".

Strangest thing you have in your home?

Harry – a taxidermy fox that I "inherited" when I got married

In 2007, artDC debuted in Washington DC without much success, what is being done to avoid a similar outcome?

From what we have been told by those who participated and were somehow involved in the show, the biggest problem for artDC was that it was organized by a large company that was not DC based – therefore it was not “OF” DC and did not fully embrace the local community, institutions, collectors, galleries and nonprofits. (e)merge is the right demographic for the city’s population, it has an edge and the vitality that is drawing thousands to move here each year. (e)merge is the only art fair to provide free exhibition space to vetted projects by unrepresented artists. Other fairs either do not allow artists to exhibit without a gallery representing them, or charge artists exhibition fees. Unlike pop-up artist exhibitions, our artist projects were reviewed and selected by a team of experts including artist Nico Vascellari, collector Mera Rubell and curators Kristen Hileman and Matthew Higgs. The artists will exhibit along with galleries and nonprofits at the fair, in a relaxed hotel setting. Our goal is to make a place in DC for experimentation and discovery, where new connections can form among professionals engaged with emerging art here and around the world.

What are some of the challenges you and your team face when starting a new fair?

With any new venture there are always challenges – What is the most effective way to build momentum and buzz, how do we ensure a steady flow throughout the fair – the challenges that we have encountered are similar to those of any fair organizer. What has been amazing is how (e)merge has been fully embraced by the DC and surrounding area communities’ institutions, collectors and artists. We are lucky too to be working with a very organized and enthusiastic team at the Capitol Skyline team – thanks to their support we have had very few logistical hurdles to overcome.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of organizing an art fair in a hotel?

One advantage is definitely the price point we are able to offer space to our galleries and nonprofits. In addition, the hotel staff is onsite, knows the venue extremely well, and is very helpful. As with all hotel fairs, it is a working hotel and we are mindful that we need to leave the rooms, grounds and public areas as we found them following our exhibition.

You have an outstanding inaugural Committee who helped with the gallery and artist selection process. Can you walk us through some of the unique requirements for the selected exhibitors?

First we established the basic criteria that any artist who is not currently represented by a commercial gallery, and has not yet had a solo museum exhibition, was qualified to apply (for the artist platform). The only restriction for galleries applying was that none of the artists proposed have had a solo museum show. Hundreds submitted proposals, which were then carefully reviewed and vetted by our committees.

What are some highlights that visitors can look forward to seeing during the fair? (e)merge has a lot to offer. In addition to the art that will be displayed throughout the first four levels of the hotel – we have an extensive programming series during the fair. Daily performances, large-scale installation projects and panel discussions and an opening night concert are among some of the highlights of the fair.

The Art Fair model seems to be going strong with fairs launching in new markets each year, where do you see the future of art fairs? Fairs are more relevant than ever. They provide an invaluable service – namely access and convenience – for collectors as well as those looking to break into the market.